

The Oodi Weavers Story: Social Change Through Community Economic Development



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[Photo: Oshale Tobani at her loom.]

In 1977, Oodi was a traditional rural village in Botswana. Today, the round thatched huts coexist side-by-side with modern cement houses and cattle graze in the shadow of satellite dishes. One constant in the life of the village, however, has been a cooperative weaving project where women and men have crafted beautiful tapestries and blankets that have sold around the world.

[Dennis Lewycky](#), now a communications and community economic development consultant in Ottawa, wrote a widely praised report on the project in 1977. In 1997, he returned to Oodi to see how the project had affected the lives of the weavers in the 20 intervening years. The result is *Equal Shares, Oodi Weavers and the cooperative experience*, which provides some important lessons about achieving social change through community economic development initiatives. The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) funded his research for the book, which is published by [Between the Lines Press](#) and will be available this month.

Weaving enterprise

"The women joked that I left as a young man and came back as an old one," says Lewycky. When he first visited the project, it had been running for four years. Set up by two Swedish artists with the help of a small grant from [CUSO](#), the weaving enterprise was designed to employ about 50 local people and generate income for the village of Oodi and surrounding communities. By creating an enterprise in a rural area, it enabled people to earn a living at home instead of migrating to work in the mines or in Gaborone, the nation's capital.

CUSO hired Lewycky to write a formal evaluation of the Lentswe la Oodi Producers Cooperative and assess whether it was meeting its goals. His report was reprinted several times and was praised in a World Bank study. "Early on, I saw in the project a mix of individual benefit and social impact that, ever since, I have been trying to [duplicate] in my international and domestic work," he says. "It was obviously trying to help women and also contribute to the overall development of the village and the nation."

Enduring success

When he returned to Oodi in 1997, Lewycky found that the project was an enduring success story, although a complicated one. It has lasted for 25 years while many similar projects have collapsed. It provides job and income security for 32 weavers, all but two of them women, who in turn put money back into the local economy and contribute to village improvements. The project's visibility and profile — tapestries depicting daily village life are hung in homes, offices, and embassies throughout the world — has given everyone in the community a sense of pride. Yet despite its achievements, the project has broken several rules. "In many ways, the project should have failed," he notes. "But it hasn't."

Lewycky explains that the project is missing key elements traditionally associated with successful community economic development programs. It lacks capital investment and has been largely self-sustaining for most of its 25 years. Ongoing training and education of workers has been minimal. The weavers have also neglected to market their wares aggressively, relying instead on word-of-mouth advertising and customer visits to their factory showroom. He says that it is chiefly the workers' emotional bond to the factory and their sense of ownership that account for the project's accomplishments. "What I think they can teach us is that commitment to a cause is a key requirement for a sustained community economic development enterprise."

Lessons learned

The Oodi weavers' story provides many other lessons, which Lewycky describes in his book. In addition to discussing financing, training, and market planning, he addresses leadership issues and organizational structure. He also stresses the more intangible aspects of the project's success: "There is a certain irrational dimension to all development that we can't explain. We can't structure the process rigidly so as to cut off spontaneity," he says. "We need to develop flexibility, intuition, and confidence in people to let the process evolve."

Equal Shares, Oodi Weavers and the cooperative experience is aimed mainly at practitioners in international and community economic development. Lewycky has already garnered positive reviews from people who have known the project many years and from the weavers themselves who have discussed and approved the manuscript.

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(Photo: D. Lewycky)*

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The book *Equal Shares, Oodi Weavers and the Cooperative Experience* (ISBN 1-896357-21-0) is available in bookstores, through the University of Toronto Press or directly from Between the Lines Press, 720 Bathurst Street, Suite 404, Toronto, ON., M5S 2R4
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